

Promise of Abundance

Rev. Dr. Carol E. Lytch, President, Lancaster Theological Seminary

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Scripture: Psalm 23, especially v. 5 “My cup overflows” and John 10: 7-15, especially “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Now it is the first week in November, and it is hard to escape the charged atmosphere of this moment when we are poised on the brink of a significant presidential election. We have been building up to Tuesday’s time of decision for many months. I imagine many of you are tired of it and want it to be over, kind of like if you are anticipating surgery that you must have and even if you dread it, you just want it to be over. I can appreciate that.

But I also think that this has been a rich and useful time for our nation to discuss its values and its competing visions for the country. At Lancaster Seminary we’ve had a stimulating set of lectures on the topic of God and politics by our systematic theologian, Professor Lee Barrett. He described the vision of this body politic, starting with the Puritans and the principles of various governments of the early colonies and the writers of the Declaration of Independence, moving to the Constitution and the thinking behind the First Amendment, the separation of church and state. And then Professor Barrett explicated idea of civil religion, different conceptions of the holy purpose that might undergird our views of our country.

Finally he dealt directly with the two presidential candidates’ rhetoric and their assumptions about the purpose of our country that are embedded in their speeches. Obama sees hope and prosperity for all as our nation’s purpose and a reduction in the inequality of life chances. Romney values the protection of individual freedoms and the importance of preserving these freedoms from both federal government intrusion and from threat from foreign powers. Those two visions are worthy and rooted in our heritage and the religious faiths of our country, specifically in the Christian claims of many of our nation’s founders.

This is a time when we are looking for guidance. We are looking for a leader to follow, and the choice of which one has a lot to do with our values and our assumptions and our confidence that the person can actually move us in the direction they promise.

I’m struck with how in our Christian tradition, and especially in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament we use the image of a shepherd as a metaphor for leadership. “The Lord is my shepherd” we say. Shepherding was a common occupation available to the ancient Hebrews who were largely a pastoral people living in an agrarian setting. The shepherd was a motif that illustrated care and wisdom and protection. The most famous king of Israel—David--was literally a shepherd. Some of the prophets, especially Jeremiah, talked about the differences between good shepherds of the people of Israel who guided the flock to prosperity and bad

shepherds who weren't in fact true shepherds but fakes who neglected the sheep and allowed the flock to be ravaged by wolves. Our New Testament passage picks up that image and Jesus is named the good shepherd who leads the flock into abundant life as compared to the hireling shepherd who allow the sheep to be ravaged by wolves.

Today I'd like to spend some time looking at one particular articulation of the good shepherd—especially as we come toward the election season—from a beloved Psalm, Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd,” it begins. What are the promises this shepherd makes to us? What I see is a promise of protection and abundance that is similar and complementary to our presidential candidates. In fact both candidates would say agree with this vision of leadership. But what is empowering to us is that the Lord who is our shepherd can actually guarantee this. And he will make this picture real in our lives as a human person who is our temporal leader should also try, but cannot guarantee.

So what does this shepherd do? What I see in Psalm 23 is the shepherd leading us into a particular kind of abundant life. The Lord, the shepherd, makes his sheep lie down in GREEN pastures. He leads them beside STILL waters. To me there's a feeling of abundance in that picture. The grazing pastures are not patched with stubble, they are lush GREEN pastures. The waters that are given for relief from thirst are not the dangerous fast flowing rivers that might sweep the sheep off balance and drown them. They are STILL waters.

Then the scene shifts from the valley of the shadow of death, and there is assurance provide there too, an abundant comfort that goes beyond the minimum. “I fear no evil,” the Psalmist declares. “For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.” In our current political climate this is what the two presidential candidates are trying to offer us—less fear of the future and more assurance in the rod and staff of governance. Do we feel comforted watching the scolding campaign commercials? Exposing all the vulnerabilities in the other candidate's leadership?

It is different with God as the shepherd/leader. This shepherd is with us. God does not favor just the bottom 47%, just the middle class or only the top 1%. God is with US--all of us. There should be no fear because God is with us.

And the green pastures picture and the valley picture in Psalm 23 shift to a third picture, to the scene of a banquet table. “In the presence of my enemies he spreads a table before me. He anoints my head with oil, a sign of favor. And my cup runneth over.” That is not just sufficiency; that is abundance.

And then there is the promise to dwell in the house of the Lord. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” It is not just about life on earth. It is forever. It is an eternal invitation of the most generous kind.

There are many stories in the New Testament to indicate that God's reign is one of abundance. Jesus' first miracle is to turn water into wine. It wasn't just table wine. It was noted that the wine was of an outstanding quality. And he multiplied loaves and fish for crowds of thousands so that just a small amount of food produced baskets of left overs. And the disciples who were fishing all night and couldn't catch anything--suddenly at Jesus' direction let down their nets again. And they caught so many fish this time that the nets were breaking as they hauled the fish in. And the abundance goes on as the apostles went out to preach and thousands embraced the gospel through their preaching.

Abundance was a sign I asked from God as I discerned my call to be president of Lancaster Seminary. These are difficult times for seminaries. Theological education is not supported by the national church the way it used to be. Historically the United Church of Christ and all the denominations of the Reformed branch of the church are known for educated clergy. We love God with our minds as well as our hearts and hands. When the first German Reformed ancestors came to the colonies they had to send back to Germany and Switzerland, and the Netherlands for university educated clergy. And after a while they decided that they wanted *American* educated clergy so they founded the Lancaster Seminary in 1825. Educated clergy is a hallmark of the United Church of Christ.

I go out and meet older alumni and alumnae and find that most of the older ones graduated without student debt because the church paid their tuition. The older graduates still had to have part-time jobs and church internships, and sometimes they had spouses who supported them to cover other expenses. And their home churches supported them. But now it is different. The UCC seminaries only receive about \$8,000 from the national church, not even the amount of a full tuition scholarship for one student. And we only receive the \$8000 every three years!

Instead it is the generosity of regional conferences that helps the seminaries. And critical support comes from congregations like yours and from individuals who have a heart for seminary education and believe in educated clergy.

The cost of a seminary education is less than other professional graduate school programs, but still it is high. Tuition is \$14, 500 per year. With cost of living expenses, books, and transportation it's about \$38,000 per year to go to seminary. Students make tremendous sacrifices to come to seminary and they do respond to God's call. They take out federal loans and the majority of them graduate with student debt that they must repay on salaries that are not as generous as other professional careers.

So abundance is a promise that as a president I am looking for. I work hard to keep the cost of a seminary education as low as possible and I pray for generous people to subsidize the costs for the sake of the students.

Psalm 23 is very personal for me. Can I really say with conviction, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want?” It is a struggle. I think if my life were portrayed by Walt Disney in a movie, this would be the point in the story when I’d look toward heaven and a windfall of dollars would come cascading from the sky. But that hasn’t happened yet.

As I said, I asked God for a sign of abundance to confirm this sense of call I have to this presidency and I’ve found abundance in other ways.

I have found an abundance of mission at the seminary. The education that the students receive at Lancaster Seminary is first class. The faculty are not just scholars, they are teachers. And they are not just teachers, they are people of deep Christian faith. When students graduate from Lancaster Seminary, they can think theologically. They can lead pastorally, and they act from a posture of contemplative wisdom, especially in high stress situations. We teach students to “know thyself,” to be active listeners, to make nuanced distinctions, to integrate knowledge of theology, bible, church history and tradition, and the contemporary context. Students learn to be leaders in the life of faith, and to be lifelong learners, committed to growing in maturity and spiritual depth.

And I’ve found an abundance of generosity from the alumni. Lancaster seminary has the highest percentage of participation of its alumni in its annual fund of all the seven UCC seminaries. Recently our first woman graduate 65 years ago gave a gift of \$450,000 to the seminary from an inheritance she’d received. Our graduates love their education and their extraordinary generosity is a sign that they trust God’s abundance in their lives.

I remember a moment last May when I wanted to buy an oil painting of the seminary done by a well-known local artist. It was of the Lark building the main building on campus built in 1893. It is a massive red brick Collegiate Gothic building with a bell tower, arched doorways, gargoyles, turrets, baloneys, and other fanciful features. And the painting captured its stunning beauty.

It was a winter scene. There was snow falling and it was night. The colored stained glass windows of the chapel were bright, as if there was a worship service going on in the chapel. The bright colorful light that shown from the widows out into the snowy darkness was like the bright gospel message that the seminary proclaims. It was an image of the mission of the school.

I went to the art auction just to buy that painting. The bidding started out slow but it did get over \$100, and then inched higher by \$10 dollar increments. I could hear that there were three of us who were serious bidders, but there was one person in particular who every time a bid was made she immediately topped it by ten dollars. I knew she intended to keep doing that. The bidding got to \$200 and I stopped. And what stopped me was thinking of our students at the seminary.

I had just heard that the graduating class at the seminary had made the largest gift ever to the seminary, enough to buy new computers for all the faculty. And our students are not rich. Most of them graduate with educational loans they have to repay. But their generous gift was a sign of their love and gratitude for the seminary.

And I thought, I could give what I would spend on this painting to the seminary and be like those generous students. So I stopped bidding and actually walked out the door with the woman who was carrying the painting. Her husband's father was a graduate of the seminary and she knew it would be meaningful to him to have it.

I tell that story because I'm grateful for students who feel a call to ministry and are willing to be educated to respond to God's call. I tell that story because sometimes abundance comes to us in different ways than we expect or pray.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says to us "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." What is the abundance in your life? Perhaps it takes an unexpected form. You wish for an abundance of good health and perhaps you have an abundance of friends instead. You wish for an abundance of financial security and you have abundance in your vocation instead. Perhaps you have a richly rewarding calling to serve others, to heal, to care for others, or to educate others in your paid work. Our political leaders promise us greater prosperity, and perhaps it will come, but even if not I believe that the good shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ, promises us abundance as we live out a sense of mission in the church to welcome and help usher in the reign of God's prosperity for all people, including those who live at the margins.

I believe this is abundance in the knowledge that we belong to God. Your pastor reminded me that from the Evangelical and Reformed wing of the United Church of Christ there is a reverence for the Heidelberg Catechism. Many of the older UCC members in the mid-Atlantic region can quote the first question and answer of Heidelberg Catechism by heart

Q1: What is your only comfort in life and death?

A1: That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

This is abundance. A knowledge that we belong body and soul, both in life and in death to our faithful savior Jesus Christ. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" is the testimony of our forbearers and it is what we know about God today.

Glory be to God for this assurance of abundance.